

## Abraham Lincoln papers

Abraham Lincoln, "My Child-hood Home I See Again,"<sup>1</sup>, 1846

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1 Lincoln told a friend that he wrote these lines "under the following circumstances. In the fall of 1844, thinking I might aid some to carry the State of Indiana for Mr. Clay, I went into the neighborhood in that State in which I was raised, where my mother and only sister were buried, and from which I had been absent about fifteen years. That part of the country is, within itself, as unpoetical as any spot of the earth; but still, seeing it and its objects and inhabitants aroused feelings in me which were certainly poetry; though whether my expression of those feelings is poetry is quite another question." (Lincoln to Andrew Johnston, April 24, 1846, *Collected Works*, I, 378.)

Lincoln first sent a version of stanzas 1-10 to his friend in Quincy, Illinois, later sending a version of the remaining stanzas. The friend, Andrew Johnston, subsequently had them published in the Quincy *Whig* on May 5, 1847. Lincoln referred to these verses as two of "four little divisions or cantos" based on his Indiana experience. Lincoln lived in Southwestern Indiana from ages 7 to 21, when he departed for Illinois. He described for Johnston the impression made on him by the "crazy man" referred to in the second "canto": "His name is Matthew Gentry. He is three years older than I, and when we were boys we went to school together. He was rather a bright lad, and the son of the rich man of our very poor neighbourhood. At the age of nineteen he unaccountably became furiously mad, from which condition he gradually settled down into harmless insanity. When, as I told you in my other letter I visited my old home in the fall 1844, I found him still lingering in this wretched condition. In my poetizing mood I could not forget the impressions his case made upon me." (Lincoln to Johnston, Sept. 6, 1846, *Collected Works*, I, 384.)

The versions of both "cantos" published in the Quincy *Whig* show a number of minor textual differences.

My child-hood home I see again,

And gladden with the view;

And still as mem'ries crowd my brain,

There's sadness in it too—

O memory! thou mid-way world

'Twixt Earth and Paradise;  
Where things decayed, and loved ones lost  
In dreamy shadows rise—  
And freed from all that's gross or vile,  
Seem hallowed, pure, and bright,  
Like scenes in some enchanted isle,  
All bathed in liquid light—  
As distant mountains please the eye,  
When twilight chases day —  
As bugle-tones, that, passing by,  
In distance die away —  
As leaving some grand water-fall  
We ling'ring list it's roar,  
So memory will hallow all  
We've known, but know no more—  
Now twenty years have passed away,  
Since here I bid farewell  
To woods, and fields, and scenes of play  
And school-mates loved so well—  
Where many were, how few remain

Of old familiar things!  
But seeing these to mind again  
The lost and absent brings—  
The friends I left that parting day —  
How changed as time has sped!  
Young child hood grown, strong manhood grey,  
And half of all are dead—  
I hear the lone survivors tell  
How nought from death could save,  
Till every sound appears a knell  
And every spot a grave—  
I range the fields with pensive tread,  
I pace the hollow rooms;  
And feel (companion of the dead)  
I'm living in the tombs—<sup>2</sup>

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2 This marks the end of the first of what Lincoln called "divisions or cantos."

A here's an object more of dread,  
Than ought the grave contains—  
A human-form, with reason fled  
While wretched life remains—

Poor Matthew! Once of genius bright,—  
A fortune-favored child—  
Now locked for age, in mental night,  
A haggard mad-man wild—  
Poor Matthew! I have ne'er forgot  
When first with maddened will,  
Yourself you maimed, your father fought,  
And mother strove to kill;  
And terror spread, and neighbours ran,  
Your dang'rous strength to bind;  
And soon a howling crazy man,  
Your limbs were fast confined—  
How then you writhed and shrieked aloud,  
Your bones and sinnews bared;  
And fiendish on the gaping crowd,  
With burning eye-balls glared—  
And begged, and swore, and wept, and prayed,  
With maniac laughter joined—  
How fearful are the signs displayed,  
By pangs that kill the mind!

And when at length, tho, dreer and long,  
Time soothed your fiercer woes —  
How plantively your mournful song,  
Upon the still night rose—  
I've heard it oft, as if I dreamed,  
Far-distant, sweet, and lone;  
The funeral dirge, it ever seemed  
Of reason dead and gone—  
To drink it's strains I've stole away,  
All silently and still,  
Ere yet the rising god of day  
Had streaked the Eastern hill—  
Air held his breath, the trees all still  
Seemed sorr'wing angels round:  
Their swelling tears in dew-drops fell  
Upon the list'ning ground—  
But this is past, and nought remains  
That raised you o'er the brute—  
Your mad'ning shrieks and soothing strains  
Are like forever mute—

Now fare thee well: more thou the cause  
Than subject now of woe.  
All mental pangs, by time's kind laws,  
Hast lost the power to know—  
And now away to seek some scene  
Less painful than the last —  
With less of horror mingled in  
The present and the past—  
The very spot where grew the bread,  
That formed my bones, I see  
How strange, old field, on thee to tread  
And feel I'm part of thee!